

Living Oelwein, Iowa

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As you look down after takeoff from O'Hare International Airport, headed west for San Francisco, California, it's only a few minutes before the intricate complexity of Chicago's suburban streets is overcome by the rolling swell of the prairie. The change is visceral as the plane's shadow floats past houses hidden within protective moats of red cedar and evergreen shelter belts. The land unfolds a geometric sweep of corn and switchgrass. Grain elevators shine like tiny pieces in a diorama; next to them, venous brownwater creeks extend their fingers warily onto the negative space of the prairie. And if you look closely as the plane climbs past Mississippi Lock and Dam Number 10, on the Iowa side of the river, you'll see a little town called Oelwein, population 6,772. You'll see, for a few ascendant moments, every street, every building, and every pickup truck in brittle, detailed relief. Briefly, you can look at this photographic image of a town, imagining the lives of the people there with voyeuristic pleasure. And then Oelwein (along with your curiosity, perhaps) is gone.¹

So begins Nick Reding's *Methland*. The book tells the story of the rise of methamphetamine production and addiction in rural America, and the concomitant macro and micro networks of forces that it is implicated in. Reding focuses on the collapse of the town of Oelwein, Iowa, and how its agrarian social organization fell prey to a changing economic, moral, and political landscape situated well beyond its town limits. Under our current regimes of political and economic control, the seeming proliferation of choice can only be accompanied by its attendant erasure and absence. While we can make out Oelwein down there on the prairie, its entropic demise, its very existence apprehended at the high-speed of social acceleration, can only become clear if we take the long way of self-reportage to reach its cracked sidewalks.

¹ Nick Reding, *Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town* (USA: Bloomsbury, 2010), 1.

This double movement of choice, to keep up the agrarian metaphors, is like a combine in full swing: the expansive field of wheat is quickly and efficiently packaged into stackable commodities, each to be buried under the weight of the next. Such a proliferation-absence paradox is borne out by the manner in which we increasingly compromise our way through the world. The best examples of this can be found in any number of human practices of contestation within large-scale technological systems. As Raymond Williams observed in his seminal study of television as a technology and a cultural form, what is at stake in these structural modalities of control, whether data disseminators or gatherers, is the make-up of our entire social process itself. The apparently abundant uses to which these sorts of information systems can be put tend to obscure their increasingly centralized and commercialized ownership structures. For Williams, writing in the 1970s, it is all too plausible that the debased citizen will become a mere consumer and will live under the illusory sign of information abundance “until individual and collective response to many different kinds of experience and problems became almost limited to choice between their programmed possibilities.”² The hobby horse of consumer choice and its attendant social practices comes to replace the active and engaged citizen, both in his or her social prestige, as well as his or her sense of affective attachment to collective responsibility.

It is a stark reality indeed wherein the times and spaces of decision-making have become overwhelming. This issue of SEACHANGE is an attempt to address our common deficits in the consciousness of choice as an open and contestable mode of engagement with the world that surrounds us. Much like Stuart Hall’s

² Raymond Williams, *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974), 151.

understanding of contingency,³ a greater awareness of the availability of choice can become a historical and ethical orientation to our present moment as an active intervention and aware opening onto action. Choice as an abundant erasure of individual agency stands today, much like Oelwein, Iowa, as a decrepit monument at a remove of thirty thousand feet. While the present issue of SEACHANGE does not want to lay claim to any comprehensive theory of choice, it is our hope that it can begin to mark the act of choosing at its multiple scales of engagement, whether that of the personal computer, the mediated, interactive environment, or the repressed *demos* of state intervention, and signal how choice is a living and contingent social process.

The guiding question for this second issue of SEACHANGE, then, is that of how we live choice, equally in the act of choosing as in its varied and contested conceptualizations. Whether articulated around the socio-technical conjunctures of the consumer, the citizen, the biologically-determined body, or the cyborg, the act of choosing has a tendency to become obscured, and leaves in a dark background the structural conditions that enable its constantly reappearing limitations. Living choice, as so often seems to be the case, becomes a mere living towards any number of unreflected upon ends; a contemporary form of subsistence epistemology for our information economies.

In *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), Hegel characterizes the “beautiful soul” as that entity of potential agency which seeks to preserve its universal purity through language by refusing to engage in action. Possibility, in other words, belongs to the realm of language, while action manifests itself through the act of choosing. This is, indeed, the paradox of choice itself: once chosen, totality is broken—the totality both of an agent’s possible actions and of possibility at

³ Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology—Marxism Without Guarantees,” in *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, June 1986 (10): 28-44.

large—and choice can never be effected again under the same ideal conditions of unlimited possibility.

A part certains cas, peu significatifs, on agit dans la vie, non en faisant des choix, mais en *répondant* activement à des situations - par le discours ou le comportement, et aussi bien par le silence ou l'inaction. Ce n'est que dans les restaurants et les grands magasins qu'on se trouve en face d'une liste de possibilités fermées.⁴

In his reflection on the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a successful model for interactive cinema, Grahame Weinbren points to a too-rarely mentioned source for the sterility of many so-called interactive⁵ environments: by stressing the difference between the fact of choice-making and that of responding to pre-existing situations, Weinbren suggests that pure choice is not, in fact, a part of lived experience. Unlike in Hegel's argument, silence or inaction become important modes through which agency is materialized; rather than the beautiful soul's incapacity to choose, it is life's inescapable tyranny of choice which is here emphasized. Thus, the growing array of multiple-choice which has become a symbol for the contemporary experience (menu-logic and consumer capitalism united in a quest to pervade all areas of existence, from the most mundane, such as food consumption, to the most sophisticated, such as identity politics) merely replicates—in a sterile, simplified manner—choice as that which has *always been there*. This is where a crucial distinction emerges: beyond the fluid, un(re)marked and incessant forms of choice-making which characterize lived experience at large, the present era is constituted, growingly, of menus from which we are required to choose *consciously*—menus, as it were, which isolate and make evident the action of choosing.

⁴ Grahame Weinbren, "Vers un cinéma interactif," *Trafic*, no. 9 (winter 1994), 124.

⁵ "[S]omething is interactive when there is a reciprocal relationship of some kind between two elements in a system" in Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, "Interactivity," *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* [1990] (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 59.

In his article “Delusions of Dialogue: Control and Choice in Interactive Art,” the San Francisco-based new media artist Jim Campbell explores the possibilities for interaction, or dialogue, between programmed interactive installations and their users. In essence, the article sought to gesture toward the possible directions which interactive art might come to adopt in the future.

An interface of choice and control makes sense for a word processor, an information retrieval system or a game, but not as a metaphor for interactivity or dialogue. [...] Interfaces that involve discrete choices leave little room for intuition. Discrete choices generally cause the viewers to look for a logical reason to make the correct choice based on what they think the consequences might be. Unless it is a game, there is no correct choice.⁶

Games—and, by extension, all programmed branching systems designed for interactivity—must be viewed as abstract models of simplification which rely on pure choice as an unnatural, sterile framework which simulates lived experience. As a result, the frequent incursions of menu-style choice within our daily lives reinforce, through a mirror-like device, the tension already identified by Hegel between the omnipresence of stimuli for choice-making and the impossibility of engaging in *true choice*. Faced with this paradox, Lev Manovich, positioning himself in the lineage of Hegel’s concept of the beautiful soul, argues for a refusal to choose:

Paradoxically, by following an interactive path, one does not construct a unique self but instead adopts already pre-established identities. Similarly, choosing values from a menu or customizing one’s desktop or an application automatically makes one participate in the “changing collage of personal whims and fancies” mapped out and coded into software by the companies. Thus, short of using the command-line interface of UNIX [...] I would prefer using Microsoft Windows exactly

⁶ Jim Campbell, “Delusions of Dialogue,” *Leonardo*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2000), 133, 135.

the way it was installed at the factory instead of customizing it in the hope of expressing my “unique identity.”⁷

Of course, just like Hegel’s concept itself, the position put forward by Manovich is, in fact, untenable: the refusal to choose is itself part of the myriad choices which make up the very fabric of human existence. In his highly personal essay, which takes the form of a series of diary entries entitled “Reflections of Image,” Toronto-based painter Bogdan Luca attempts to reconcile the infinite choices offered by the internet and possibilities for true choice within an artistic practice which draws heavily upon randomly accessible images. In addition to the tension between control and indeterminacy which results from the internet’s growing role as database or *atlas*, Luca evokes a parallel thread of questions revolving around participation and democracy, from the 1989 fall of Ceausescu in Romania to the recent Canadian federal election. These reflections, in turn, echo Ali Sayed Mohamed’s article, “The Political Discourse of Egyptian Blogs: A Case Study of *Egyptian Awareness*” which is an excerpt from his doctoral thesis titled *Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Blogs, Bloggers, and the Public Sphere in Egypt*. Following Michael Warner’s observation that “[t]he projection of a public is a new, creative, and distinctively modern mode of power,”⁸ Ali Sayed Mohamed offers an in-depth and prescient analysis of the groundwork, equally linguistic, cultural, and political, that such blogs as Wael Abbas’s *Egyptian Awareness* created a space for.

In the Internet era, open ended as it is, knowledge production by digital means becomes a de facto instance of common good menu creation. To whom such an ordered and preordained good is common, is a question that is often left by the wayside. This rampant ideology of sharing, access, accessibility, and

⁷ Manovich, 129.

⁸ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter-Publics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 108.

commonality, those parameters of choice that our personal computers seem to fan out before us like an endless deck of cards, are, as we well know, pre-sorted and highly determined categories of not-so-common, semi-public goods. As Paulina Mickiewicz's article, "Google Books vs. the Library: Shaping Choice, Creating Publics," critiques, choice, all at once algorithmic, intentionally minimized while also personalized, precedes us and exploits us. "The application of steam power to the production of paper, and, in turn, of the newspaper, followed by the telegraph, and the exploitation of human curiosity and its interest in news by advertisers anxious to dispose of their products," as Harold Innis wrote, "created efficient channels for the spread of information"⁹; and so it goes in our supposedly wireless and effortlessly networked age.

However, there is also a very real way in which emerging technologies have become part of our lives, recording incessantly what goes on and posing the question of whether we need to, or even can, react or not. The conversation between Dylan Mulvin and Carrie Rentschler in this issue touches on just such questions of action and inaction by looking at the Kitty Genovese murder of 1964. They offer an intriguing discussion of the murder's conjunctural import in the mid-1960s and its attendant influence on developments in modern psychology, recording technologies, as well as the manner in which the lived and conceptual category of witnessing shaped and was shaped by the Genovese case.

The roundtable discussion in this issue, a wide ranging and lively conversation staged by SEACHANGE between Professors Darin Barney, Andrew Piper, and Joanna Zylinska, engages with the place of emerging technologies in our current practices of scholarly inquiry, as well as the wider demands techno-capitalist societal pressures are putting on increasingly

⁹ Harold Innis, "On the Economic Significance of Culture," in *Staples, Markets, and Cultural Change: Selected Essays of Harold Innis*, ed. by Daniel Drache (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 303.

globalized university environments. Offering no solutions yet asking carefully crafted questions, it makes for a timely investigation into the multiple, interwoven futures on the horizon for universities and students alike.

Finally, Negin Djavaherian's incisive interview with Dariush Shayegan, one of Iran's most prominent philosophers, picks up on the tense imperatives that increasingly exportable democratic regimes both entail and demand. By interrogating the non-identity of so many supposedly "global" values, Shayegan questions how democratic participation can take place at multiple scales, equally individual, political, and epistemological, and how these values circulate across cultural, religious and ethnic lines.

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